

## Three

# The Five Gates of Grief

Where there is sorrow, there is holy ground.

—OSCAR WILDE

Over the course of our lives, grief enters our hearts in many ways. If we are to acknowledge and tend our grief, it is important to become familiar with what I call the *Five Gates of Grief*. Each of these doorways leads to the communal hall of grief, and each helps us to understand the many ways that loss touches our hearts and souls in this life.

We are all familiar with the first gate of grief, which is the sorrow we experience with the loss of someone or something we love. The other four gates receive virtually no attention in modern society. Consequently, the grief that accumulates at these thresholds remains untouched, and we feel the growing weight of unattended sorrows. This is often misdiagnosed as depression. We are pushed down, overwhelmed by so much congested grief. The number one cause of death in this society is congestive heart failure. What is it that is congesting our hearts? It is more than plaque buildup in the arteries, more than high levels of cholesterol. We are burdened by undigested sorrows as well. Far too many of us suffer from broken hearts that remain unattended. By understanding the grief that is held at these other gates, we may be able to compassionately meet

it and, in the right settings, allow the full expression of grief to be felt and honored.

### The First Gate: Everything We Love, We Will Lose

I have come to have a deep faith in grief, have come to see the way its moods call us back to soul. It is, in fact, one of the voices of the soul, asking us to face life's most difficult but essential teaching: everything is a gift, and nothing lasts. This is a painful truth. To accept this fact is to live on life's terms and not to try to deny the simple truth of loss, what the Buddhists call *impermanence*. When we acknowledge grief, we acknowledge that everything we love, we will lose. No exceptions. Now, of course, we want to argue this point, saying that we will keep in our hearts the love of those who depart this earth before us: our parents, or our spouse, or our children, or our friends, or, or, or—and yes, that is true. It is grief, however, that allows the heart to stay open to this love, to remember sweetly the ways these people touched our lives. It is only when we deny grief's entry into our lives that we begin to compress the breadth of our emotional experience and live shallowly. There is a poem from the twelfth century that beautifully articulates this lasting truth about the risks we take when we choose to love.

For Those Who Have Died

*Eleh Ezkerah—These We Remember*

'Tis a fearful thing  
 To love  
 What death can touch.  
 To love, to hope, to dream,  
 And oh, to lose.

A thing for fools, this,  
Love,  
But a holy thing,  
To love what death can touch.

For your life has lived in me;  
Your laugh once lifted me;  
Your word was a gift to me.

To remember this brings painful joy.

'Tis a human thing, love,  
A holy thing,  
To love  
What death can touch.

—JUDAH HALEVI OR EMANUEL OF ROME<sup>24</sup>

This startling poem goes to the very heart of what I am saying. “It is a holy thing to love what death can touch.” To keep it holy, however, to keep it accessible, we must become fluent in the language and customs of grief. If we don’t, our losses become great weights that drag us down, pulling us below the threshold of life and into the world of death.

My grief says that I dared to love, that I allowed another to enter the very core of my being and find a home in my heart. Grief is akin to praise; it is how the soul recounts the depth to which someone has touched our lives. To love is to accept the rites of grief.

One day a young man walked into my office with a sad look on his face. He shared that he had just come back from time spent with his new love and that he’d had a wonderful weekend with her. He’d returned home, taken care of some things, fixed some dinner for

himself, and then turned on his computer to look at photos of his parents and his girlfriend. And then it hit him. He said, "I realized at that moment that I am going to lose them all." He wept those bitter tears that melt us and reduce us to the vulnerable truths we must all confront. We need these bitter tears sometimes. They are a tonic, a fortifying essence that helps us digest these difficult realities.

He said he had tried his whole life to keep this truth away, but this day he welcomed the dark angel of grief, the one holding the sharp truth of impermanence. He told me he wanted his heart to stay open and to love big. This was a beautiful moment, a life-changing moment for this young man, forged by the fierce beauty of loss.

It is the bittersweet embrace of love and loss that sharpens our appreciation for those we love. Staying open to this vulnerable truth is challenging, especially in a culture that keeps pushing grief to the margins. Sometimes, however, we cannot deny this guest at the door.

I remember being in New York City less than a month after the World Trade Center towers were destroyed in 2001. My son was going to college there, and this tragedy occurred shortly after his first major time away from home. The two of us made our way into the city, and what I saw touched me deeply. Everywhere I went, there were grief shrines, flowers adorning pictures of loved ones lost. There were circles of people in parks, some silent, others singing. It was clear that the soul has an elemental requirement to do this, to gather and mourn and weep and cry out in pain in order for the healing to begin. On some level we know that this is a requirement when facing loss, but we have forgotten how to walk comfortably expressing it.

Illness is another grief we find at the first gate. Any lingering illness can activate a feeling of loss. When a prolonged sickness arises in our life, we lament the life we once knew and enjoyed, the one brimming with vitality. We feel emptied and drained, finding little joy or motivation for the day. We may feel betrayed by our body, as

though we no longer have a foundation beneath us for living fully. Illness dislodges our sense of control and invulnerability. We resist, resent, argue, and protest, attempting to wrestle our lives back from this unwelcome guest.

When our health deteriorates in illness, we feel diminished, whittled away by loss after loss. Carl Jung described his experience following a heart attack as a “painful process of defoliation.” He said, “everything I aimed at or wished for or thought, the whole phantasmagoria of earthly existence, fell away or was stripped from me.”<sup>25</sup> When good health feels far away, we are taken into places where our faith in life can flicker. One woman attended a grief ritual following a double mastectomy. Her sorrow was poignant and deeply touching. She shed the tenderest tears for the loss of her body’s wholeness. Another woman shared that she was facing the last few months of her life and needed to address her grief over the losses she carried from having been ill so long: the loss of work, of friendships, of strength, of dreams.

Illness asks much of us. I remember one man who came to my practice following a serious heart attack. He was obviously shaken by the experience. He was a high-powered man in a position of authority, and he was anxious to return to his former status at the top of the chain of command. I sat and listened to his story over several weeks and could see how desperate he was to reclaim his former strength. One day I said to him, “I’m concerned that you are going to waste a perfectly good heart attack! You are so committed to returning to how things were. Have you stopped to consider that those were the conditions that brought about the heart attack in the first place? Your work now is to hear what your heart is telling you. You have turned your back on many things—love, your friendships, and your body—and your heart is filled with grief. This heart attack is telling you something. Listen!” It was a difficult thing for him to do. Something radical was being asked of him. *Radical* comes from

the Latin word for “root.” His heart was calling him back to deeper ground, to the roots of his life.

In the opening circle with cancer patients that I colead at Commonweal,<sup>26</sup> I share that their illness has thrown them into a *rough initiation*. All initiatory events, like those still held in living cultures, take one into an unknown and unshaped world. Here, nothing is as it was; nor is it intended to be. It is a time of shedding and endings. The familiar world is left behind, and we exist at the edge of something without shape. It is a place of radical change. In other words, the identity we had known for our entire life has just been dissolved. Illness carries us into places of great uncertainty. Will we ever get better? Will we ever get back to where we were before we got sick? We can no longer lean on what we know for a feeling of stability. Things teeter and shake; we feel adrift on unfamiliar seas, and as in all true initiations, we fear that we will sink into the waters of death.

When we are in the grips of illness, a major focus in our mind is the hope of getting back to where we were before this sickness began. *But we are not meant to go back.* Like the man above, who resisted hearing what his heart was saying, we must recognize that we have been uprooted by our cancer, our heart attack, or our depression, and we have been set down on some new shore. Like any true ritual process, we are meant to come out of the experience deeply changed.

Illness strips away all excess, winnowing us down to the bare essentials. When the choice of denial has been stripped away, as it is in illness, we are brought face to face with our own mortal lives, our tender vulnerabilities, the old wounds that linger in our hearts, the fragility of flesh, and the immensity of soul. We are ushered into a darker night that sheds an astonishing light on our deeper and more genuine shape. The old stories, crafted in a mixture of childhood wounds and societal fictions, slowly yield to something more generous, elastic, and responsive to the life of the soul. We begin to experience a more vivid complexity that takes us out of the either/or

world of adolescence and into the alchemy of our adult selves. Here, in this more ripened place, we can see how much more we can hold, tasting both the sweet and the bitter, the beautiful and the painful, all in the same moment. Everything we avoided for the sake of living in safety yields to a desire to encounter it all. We slowly recognize that no emotion is foreign to the soul, and every one of them can be welcomed as they arrive at the door. We gradually become able to embrace the full terrain of living.

Kat Duff, in *The Alchemy of Illness*, describes her long journey with chronic fatigue syndrome and its relationship to grief. She writes, “The Indo-European root of the word ‘cure,’ means to sorrow for something, and I have yet to meet a sick person who doesn’t sorrow deeply for something: the breakdown of a marriage, an early death in the family, or the nameless innocents slaughtered in war.”<sup>27</sup> What she found at the bottom of her illness was a grief that, when she could fully express it, bound her to her life and the rest of the world. As Susan Griffin noted, “At the center of / all my sorrows / I have felt a presence / that was not mine alone.”<sup>28</sup>

But all too often, when grief does not bind us to life, its gravity can literally pull us into the grave. Losing someone we love is acutely painful. When death comes in the form of suicide, we encounter another, oftentimes more complicated, grief. We are bewildered, shocked, and angry. We feel betrayed, abandoned—every wild and unsettled emotion courses through our bodies as we try to make sense of the senseless. It is traumatic, ripping through our hearts like shrapnel. We are left dazed.

There is something particular to this loss that undoes us. It undermines the ground beneath us, turning it to quicksand. Aren’t we supposed to want to live? For many of us, the choice to end one’s life feels impossible to digest and yet, in our own secret chambers, many of us have wrestled with the question whether “to be, or not to be.” We are supposed to say yes to life—the Great American

positivism. And yet, suicide and suicidal thoughts have touched many of us. Suicide is not a one-dimensional creature that we can get a rope around and keep corralled. It happens for many reasons, and the reasons do not settle the hearts of the ones left to struggle in the wild wake of emotions. I have sat with many people who have had someone in their lives commit suicide. One woman, in her sixties, was finally able to acknowledge and grieve the suicide of her mother. She had been only two years old at the time. All through her life, she had tried to tell herself, "That was so long ago. It doesn't really matter." But the effects of this great tear in her psychic foundation lingered for six decades, making her unsure of her worth and eating away at her faith in life. It dammed her tears and made it hard for her to love.

There is often a feeling of shame attached to the survivors of suicide, a hidden doubt that they might not have done enough to prevent this death. This is a doubling of the pain. Their grief is bound together with shame, making it more difficult to talk with others and get the support they need. Finding the courage to share your experience with others is an essential piece in mending this profound sorrow.

When we experience the loss of someone or something that we love, other places of grief can rise from their hiding places and ask for attention. One woman I worked with had recently suffered the death of her son. The death was sudden and unexpected. For months she sat with this grief, slowly learning how to tend it. What she began to notice during this time, however, was another tributary of grief that rose to meet the main river of tears she was experiencing. She confided that she had never been able to ask others for what she needed. She had been everybody's caretaker, making sure that everyone was okay. Now, here she sat, in a state of absolute need, wrestling with the voices that were trying to silence her right to ask for support for herself. These two sources of grief merged over time,



and she could begin to see a strange grace hidden within the loss of her son; some piece of her soul could now come home.

## The Second Gate: The Places That Have Not Known Love

There is another entrance to grief, a second gateway, different from the gate connected to losing someone or something that we love. This grief occurs in the places often untouched by love. These are profoundly tender places precisely because they have lived outside of kindness, compassion, warmth, or welcome. These are the places within us that have been wrapped in shame and banished to the farthest shores of our lives. We often hate these parts of ourselves, hold them in contempt, and refuse to allow them the light of day. We do not show these outcast brothers and sisters to anyone, and we thereby deny these parts of ourselves the healing salve of community.

These neglected pieces of soul live in utter despair. What we perceive as defective about ourselves, we also experience as loss. Whenever any portion of who we are is denied, we live in a condition of loss. The proper response to any loss is grief, but *we cannot grieve for something that we feel is outside the circle of worth*. That is our predicament—we chronically sense the presence of sorrow, but we are unable to truly grieve, because we feel in our body that this piece of who we are is unworthy of grief.

For many years, I offered lectures on shame. But I remember that when I was first asked to give a talk on shame, I was confused. *Why were they asking me to give this talk?* I was certain no one would show up for the lecture. I was pretty certain that I was the only one who felt this level of shame. *Well, maybe a dozen people will turn out.* The first night, there were sixty-five people in attendance. It grew from there, with well over one hundred people showing up night

after night to talk about shame. I offered these talks for many years, and they were always well attended. Clearly I was not the only one who felt the pain of shame. It was felt by many, and I came to see how we live in a society that is drenched in shame.

Shame ruptures our connection with life and with our soul. It is, indeed, a sickness of the soul. When feelings of shame arise, we pull back from the world, avoiding contact that could cause or risk exposure. The last thing we want in times of excruciating self-consciousness is to be seen. We find ourselves avoiding the gaze of others, we become silent and withdrawn, all in hopes of slipping under the radar. I remember sharing with the audience that the goal of the shame-bound person was to get from birth to death without ever being an echo on the radar of life. My tombstone was going to read "Safe at Last."

Gershon Kaufman, one of the most important writers on shame, has said that shame leaves us feeling "unspeakably and irreparably defective."<sup>29</sup> It is unspeakable because we do not want anyone to know how we feel inside. We fear it is irreparable because we think it is not something we have done wrong—it is simply *who we are*. We cannot remove the stain from our core. We search and search for the defect, hoping that, once found, it can be exorcised like some grotesque demon. But it lingers, remaining there our entire lives, anxious that it will be seen and simultaneously longing to be seen and touched with compassion.

No one arrives on this earth encrusted with shame. Rather, shame settles in our bones over time, accumulating during times of neglect or violation. Every one of us has encountered times when the connection between us and the one we needed for attention and love was ruptured. I remember once when my son was two years old, I was in the kitchen making him breakfast. He came running into the kitchen and joyously shouted, "Daddy! Daddy!" I turned to him abruptly and shouted, "Stop it!" He looked stunned and ran to his

bedroom. I knew that my response had shamed him. I put the eggs down and went to his room, knelt down on the floor and looked him in the eyes. I said, "You wanted something from me, and I didn't give it to you. What is it that you want to say to me?" He said, "It felt like you didn't want to be my daddy anymore." My heart sank, and I said, "No. No. We're good. That was all mine. I'm so sorry I got angry at you like that. We are good, and I love you." He brightened and smiled, hugged me, and went off to play; the bridge between us had been restored.

As I walked out of his bedroom, I wondered, *What would've happened if I hadn't gone in there?* I remembered Kaufman saying that it is always up to the adult to restore the bridge with the child. In that moment, I understood powerfully the cost to a child who had to be the one to make the overture of repair. If I hadn't gone in there, my son would have had to ingest his fear that I did not want to be his father any longer. The worst part of it, however, is that he would have felt it was his fault—if he hadn't been so exuberant, so needy for my attention, I might still hold him in my heart. He would feel he had to restrain these parts of himself in the future if he was to receive my love once again.

Sometime later, reflecting upon that tender moment, I recalled an experiment making rock candy in my high school chemistry class. I'm sure many of us share this memory, but for those who don't, the experiment involved taking a glass of water, tying a string to a pencil, and placing the string in the water. Then we slowly added sugar to the water, creating a solution. And nothing happens ... nothing happens ... and then, when the saturation point is reached, the sugar molecules begin to crystallize around the string. I thought, *This is how it is with shame.* We can endure a certain number of times when the connection is broken between us and the people we love and need. We can digest a certain volume of disappointments and criticism. But at some point, with enough repetition, the internal stories

associated with those events reach their saturation point, and the fictions crystallize into things that feel like truths. There was no part of me that didn't want to be my son's father, and yet, with enough impatient outbursts and no offers of reparation, my son might have believed otherwise.

Herein begins the slow, insidious process of carving up the self to fit into the world of adults. We become convinced that our joy, sadness, needs, sensuality, and so forth are the cause of our unacceptability, and we are more than willing to cleave off portions of our psychic life for the sake of inclusion, even if it is provisional. We become convinced, on some basic level, that these pieces of who we are, are not good enough—that they are, in fact, shameful—and we banish them to the farther shore of our awareness in hopes of never hearing from them again. They become our outcast brothers and sisters. I remember going to therapy with the expressed interest in having my therapist help me rid myself of these unwanted pieces.

Shame closes the heart to self-compassion. We live with an internal state best characterized as self-hatred. In order to loosen shame's grip on our lives, we need to make three moves. The first is from feeling worthless to seeing ourselves as wounded. The second emerges from the first and is a shift from seeing ourselves through the lens of contempt to one of a budding compassion. And the third is moving from silence to sharing. As long as we see our suffering as evidence of worthlessness, we will not move toward our wounds with anything but judgment.

One woman I worked with blamed herself for being molested when she was ten years old. She carried that story with absolute conviction, and she hated that little girl inside of her. At the time, there had been no attentive adults in her world to tell her that what happened to her was awful and wrong, that it had nothing to do with her. Fortunately, while we were working together, she had two young daughters at home who were about the same age as she

had been when the violation occurred. I asked her one day to go home and look into the eyes of her daughters and notice what she saw. When she returned the next week, we sat down, and I asked her what she had seen. She said, "Innocence." I asked her if it might be possible that she, too, was innocent at that age and not responsible for what happened. She nodded yes and began to weep for this interior girl for the first time. This was the beginning of her healing and her return to community. For the first time, she was able to see what happened to her as a wound and not as a commentary on her worth. She was able to take in the first few breaths of compassion and begin to tend this tortured inner self. From there, she was able to make the last move by sharing about her experience in the open light of community. Her shame dissolved, and she was moved to grieve for that innocent girl.

That third move we must make, from silence to sharing, is important, but be mindful to share these vulnerable truths *only* with people you fully trust. As Goethe said, "Tell a wise person, or else keep silent."<sup>30</sup>

## Premature Death

Much of our grief comes from having to crouch and live hidden from the gaze of others, and in that posture we confirm our exile. I hear these outcast brothers and sisters every day in my practice. Their numbers are many, and their grief encompasses every aspect of human life. For some, these outcast pieces are connected to their sexuality and bodies; for others, it is their anger or sadness—or their joy and exuberance—that has been banished. For many, it is their needs that were ignored. These outcast portions of soul do not quietly languish at the edges of our awareness; they appear as addictions, depression, or anxiety, calling for our attention. They appear in our dreams as waifs and orphans, in images of ghettos and prison

cells. One man, struggling with alcoholism, had a dream that he was walking into a bar, oblivious to a beautiful woman standing there. As he entered, she shouted, “Hey, when are you going to pay attention to me?” Here was his soul calling to him, demanding that he turn and attend to his neglected life.

Many of us suffer from what I call *premature death*, in that we have turned away from whole portions of our life. We have adapted to a pattern of ambivalence, neither in nor out of life, but living in a state of suspended animation. This stance generates a strategy of caution and avoidance. I have worked with hundreds of men and women who have artfully dodged the call to engage in living with passion and conviction. As Diane Ackerman wrote, “I don’t want to get to the end of my life and find that I lived just to the length of it. I want to have lived the width of it as well.”<sup>31</sup>

Several years ago, I was leading a group of men in Southern California in a workshop on love and death. On the second day of our time together, I asked, “What is the vow your soul is waiting for you to make?” This generated intense discussion and a good deal of grief, as men recognized that this longing in their soul was something that had been denied or ignored. They spoke about their desire to be more vulnerable, to take greater risks in love, to hold a commitment to their creativity, and more. This question called forth what was not being lived, the outcast, silenced parts of their soul. After that, I posed a second question: “What will you have to sacrifice in order to honor that vow?” Once again, it became clear to them that they were holding on to strategies designed to keep them safe, living within a prescribed radius where no one could hurt them. We worked with these two questions for the remainder of the day and shared a ritual that night to honor the sacrifice that was being asked of us. Some men released their inability to speak up when they had something important to say, others let go of their addiction to approval and praise, while others released their need to be right.

When we gathered together again on Sunday morning, I had a third question for them. I said, "Imagine that it is some time in the future and you are near the hour of your death. You know this. You look back on your life and see that you have honored your vow and have been able to stay true to the sacrifice you made. For what would your soul like to be remembered? Write your obituary." What emerged from this time in the circle was deeply moving. Here we felt the presence of what mattered most to these men: to love big, to contribute to their communities, to nurture their children, and to feed their own souls with beauty and aliveness. All of this, however, could not become possible until they stepped fully into their lives, into the river of their full existence, welcoming all those pieces of soul that had been banished through self-betrayal or the fear of rejection from others.

It is important to look into the shadows of our lives and to see who lives there, tattered, withered, hungry, and alone. Bringing these parts of soul back to the table is a central element of our work. Ending their exile means releasing the contempt we hold for these parts of who we are. It means welcoming the full range of our being and restoring our wholeness. Until then, we will continue to carry a feeling of worthlessness and brokenness.

Seen from an indigenous perspective, the grief we experience at this gate is a form of *soul loss*, a condition that occurs when the desire for life—the feeling of being alive—becomes so blunted that death becomes appealing and depression a way of life. Every day in my practice I encounter individuals struggling with isolation, despair, and meaninglessness. To traditional people, soul loss was, without doubt, the most dangerous condition a human being could face. It compromises our vital energy, decreases joy and passion, diminishes our aliveness and our capacity for wonder and awe, saps our voice and courage, and ultimately, erodes our desire to live. We become disenchanted and despondent.

The idea of soul loss is ancient. This old intuition says that the soul can fragment, be stolen, break, or flee. It happens for a variety of reasons: physical or emotional trauma, a prolonged sickness, extensive neglect and shaming, and (a common modern reason) the chronic assault of a mind-numbing existence that stupefies, dulls and renders our lives empty.

For many of us, the diminishment in our soul life began in childhood. We experienced what is now referred to as *developmental trauma*, what I call *slow trauma*. This trauma occurs from an experience of absence rather than from something dramatic that happened to us. There may not have been explosive events in the home, no overt acts of violence, but there were more subtle omissions of attention and care. In those moments when we needed to be soothed or held, the touch often didn't come, or what was offered was a partial and distracted attention. What we were granted was too thin and didn't provide us with enough substance to calm the effect of the experience we were having. I see the remnants of this trauma daily in my practice. It shows itself in the inability to regulate internal states of distress as they arise and in feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness.

Gudrun Zomerland has written about trauma as “the shaking of a soul.” “The German word for trauma [is] ‘Seelenschütterung.’ The first part, ‘Seele’ means soul.... ‘Erschütterung’ is something that shakes us out of the ordinary flow and out of our usual sense of time into an extraordinary state.”<sup>32</sup> Trauma, then, is a *soul-shaking* experience that ruptures the continuity of our lives and tosses us into an alternate existence. When this soul shaking occurs frequently and early in life, as a result of prolonged neglect, what was originally an extraordinary state gradually becomes ordinary. It is the world as we know it—unsafe, unreliable, and frightening. This is a profound loss and a lingering sorrow that is difficult to hold. The failure of the world to offer us comfort in the face of trauma causes us to



retreat from the world. We live on our heels, cautiously assessing whether it is safe to step in; we rarely feel it is. One man I worked with slowly revealed how he expected less than zero from life. He deserved nothing. He had a hard time asking for salt at a restaurant. His persistent image in therapy was of a small boy hiding behind a wall. It was not safe for him to venture into the world. He was terrified of being seen. I know, because I lived this way for forty years, wary and determined to prevent further pain by remaining on the margins of life, untouchable and seemingly safe.

Here we find the agonizing convergence of trauma and shame. The failure of others to adequately attend the painful emotional experiences we have as children is translated as a reflection on our being inherently bad and outside the embrace of love. "Surely if I mattered, if I were good enough, this need, this pain would have received attention and holding by someone." Recall my son's immediate conclusion that I didn't want to be his father any longer. These ruptures in the holding space between children and caregivers are nearly impossible to hold neutrally.

In his brilliant book *The Trauma of Everyday Life*, psychiatrist and Buddhist scholar Mark Epstein addresses the pervasive nature of trauma. He says that trauma is inherent in being human, but "when painful emotions and unpleasant feelings are not picked up and handled by the parents, the infant, or child, is left with overwhelming feelings he or she is not equipped to deal with, feelings that often get turned into self-hate."<sup>33</sup> Here trauma remains a source of ongoing suffering, eating away at our worth and undermining our ability to step fully into our lives. It lingers in our soul as a *primitive agony*, an idea that Epstein draws from the work of British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott. Primitive agony remains in our psyches as a gravitational field, pulling us downward toward anxiety and dread.

Epstein shows us the way out of this maze, drawing on the teachings of Winnicott and the Buddha, both of whom stress the need

of creating an internal holding environment that resembles that of a caring and attentive mother. Mindfulness becomes the soft space within which the agony of our losses can be held. It is an approach of reverence, of compassion, granting us a spaciousness that helps to untangle the knot in our souls. This is the core of my work in my practice.

This approach reminds us of the importance of remaining in our adult selves when working with grief states. The adult is the only one who can offer this holding space for our sorrows, pains, and suffering. It is too easy for the child self to get pulled into his or her primitive agony and dissociated parts or complexes, when sorrow knocks on the door. Turning toward the suffering and into the marrow of our grief with the attention and attunement of a caring adult helps to dilute and transmute the trauma and shame into the kind of sensitivity that can inform our compassion for others.

There are times, however, when the caring presence comes from outside of ourselves. The community can be the holding space for our most painful stories. I remember one young woman in her early twenties who attended a grief ritual in Washington. Over the course of the three days that we worked to turn over our grief and compost those pieces into fertile soil, she continuously cried quietly to herself. I worked with her individually for some time and heard her lamentations about her worthlessness through gasps and tears. When it was time for the ritual, she rushed to the shrine, and I could hear her crying out over the drums, "I am worthless, I'm not good enough." And she wept and wept, all within the container of the community, in the presence of witnesses, alongside others deep in the process of releasing their grief. When it was over, she shone like a star; she had finally realized how wrong the stories about her worthlessness were and how precious were these pieces of her essential self.

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A BRIEF NOTE ON BLAME

Having worked with people for more than thirty years in my practice, it is clear to me that finding a target to blame is effortless. Nothing is asked of us when we simply assign fault to someone else for the suffering we are experiencing. Psychology has colluded in the blame game, pointing an accusing finger at our parents. While many of us suffered mightily because of unconscious parenting, we must remember that our parents were participants in a society that failed to offer them what they needed in order to become solid individuals and good parents. They needed a village around them—and so did we. Of course we were disappointed with our parents. We expected forty pairs of eyes greeting us in the morning, and all we got was one or two pairs looking back at us. We needed the full range of masculine and feminine expressions to surround us and grant us a knowledge of how these potencies move in the world. We needed to have many hands holding us and offering us the attention that one beleaguered human being could not possibly offer consistently. It is to our deep grief that the village did not appear.

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Archetypal psychologist James Hillman offers an image that speaks to the work of bringing these rejected aspects of soul back from the wasteland.

The alchemists had an excellent image for the transformation of suffering and symptom into a value of soul. A goal of the alchemical process was the pearl of great price. The pearl starts off as a bit of grit, a neurotic symptom or complaint, a bothersome irritant

in one's secret inside flesh, which no defensive shell can protect oneself from. This is coated over, worked at day in and day out, until the grit one day is a pearl; yet it still must be fished up from the depths and pried loose. Then when the grit is redeemed, it is worn. It must be worn on the warm skin to keep its luster: the redeemed complex which once caused suffering is exposed to public view as a virtue. The esoteric treasure gained through occult work becomes an exoteric splendor. To get rid of the symptom means to get rid of the chance to gain what may one day be of greatest value, even if at first an unbearable irritant, lowly and disguised.<sup>34</sup>

It is in the inferior parts of our life that we will find redemption. This is, however, hard for us to accept in a culture driven by the demand for perfection. Still, it is in the outcasts, those parts of us that we have sent to the edges of awareness, that we will recover our true humanity. It is within our "secret inside flesh" that we will touch our weakness, inadequacy, failure, dependency, and the host of experiences that undermine our culture's heroic ideal. This is where we find our healing. The "least of our brothers and sisters" are the ones that require us to reveal our wounds. In so doing, we are freed from the obsession with measuring up and getting it right. And it is through grieving for these despised pieces of life that we restore our humanity. It is here that we begin to recover the unlived life.

David Whyte offers a beautiful poem on the ways we are invited to welcome back the outcast parts of our being. This stanza from "Coleman's Bed" is filled with self-compassion.

Be taught now, among the trees and rocks,  
 how the discarded is woven into shelter,  
 learn the way things hidden and unspoken  
 slowly proclaim their voice in the world.  
 Find that inward symmetry

to all outward appearances, apprentice  
yourself to yourself, begin to welcome back  
all you sent away, be a new annunciation,  
make yourself a door through which  
to be hospitable, even to the stranger in you.<sup>35</sup>

His imagery is generous, inviting us to approach the fragments of our life with curiosity and humility. He then offers a surprising revelation: every part of us longs to reveal its voice to the world. We must welcome back all we have sent away and, in so doing, become a new annunciation. Imagine seeing ourselves this way. What a wild and freeing image, like Gabriel and Mary in the secret conversation about what is most holy. Invite them in, feed them, and be hospitable.

Regrets are another part of the second gate, those choices we made that hindered or harmed others or ourselves: the unlived life of abandoned dreams, friendships that withered and died, or the decision to withdraw our hearts from the world and neither receive nor offer love. These things we regret are sources of deep and abiding loss. To live with regret is a heavy sadness. It is like walking through a graveyard of loss. Regrets require the soft hands of self-compassion. It is easy for us to judge and shame ourselves relentlessly for past mistakes. We chew these bones over and over in the vain hope that some new perspective might arise, freeing us from the sorrow attached to our actions. That won't help. Instead, what is asked of us in the quiet terrain of our inner conversation is to hold these regrets with gentleness, acknowledging who we were at the time we made those choices. What part of us might have come to the foreground of our life in that particular moment? Kindness and mercy are soothing medicines in the room of regret. Forgiveness cannot be willed. We can, however, create the conditions within which the grace of forgiveness can arise. When our regrets are polished by self-compassion, they soften and release the life trapped inside.

Sometimes the grief we carry for these lost pieces of soul comes out in the language of outrage. Many of us were taught to be *nice boys and girls*, to not speak up when we are injured or shamed. Those of us carrying this oppressive weight need the support of the community to encourage us to find our voice, to speak out against the internalized silencing. During our grief rituals, we use writing practices that help to free the voice that yearns to tell the truth. One of our practices includes what we call *protest shuttles*, phrases that grant us permission to enter the forbidden territories of resistance and outrage. Some participants find the phrase “It is not all right with me ...” to be liberating; others, “I will not shut up ...” or “I will not live small.” Sometimes the simple “Enough!” does the work. Each of these offerings encourages the long-held grief around these rejected parts to rise and put an end to their exile. It is important to remember that grief does not appear solely through tears; it is also expressed through our anger and outrage. Through acknowledging our grief, we begin the process of being made whole again.

We held a grief ritual shortly after the 9/11 attacks. Many stories of violence and violation were being evoked by the tragedy. As we listened to the intensity of the stories, we realized we needed to offer a secondary shrine for this event. The normal shrine at these rituals is a water shrine. Water is the element of healing and renewal in many traditions. On this occasion, however, the element of fire was also being called in. Fire is the energy of passion and ignition, and it is often associated with the ancestors. People needed an energy field large enough to fully receive their protests. The site where we were holding this ritual had an immense old fireplace in it. At one end of the room, we created our water shrine, and at the other, surrounding the fireplace, we built the second shrine. Once the ritual began, people spent time weeping at the water shrine and shouting their outrage to the fire. Many of them migrated back and forth, from shrine to shrine. At times, rage would trigger tears, and at others, tears would evoke rage.

Grief is a powerful solvent, capable of softening the hardest of places in our hearts. When we can truly weep for ourselves and those places of shame, we have invited the first soothing waters of healing to wash through our souls. Grieving, by its very nature, confirms worth. I am worth crying over; my losses matter. I can still feel the grace that came when I truly allowed myself to grieve all of my own losses connected to a life filled with shame. Peshia Gertler speaks beautifully of the compassion of a heart opened by grief.

THE HEALING TIME

Finally on my way to yes  
I bump into  
all the places  
where I said no  
to my life  
all the untended wounds  
the red and purple scars  
those hieroglyphs of pain  
carved into my skin and bones,  
those coded messages  
that send me down  
the wrong street  
again and again  
where I find them,  
the old wounds  
the old misdirections  
and I lift them  
one by one  
close to my heart  
and I say holy  
holy.<sup>36</sup>

## The Third Gate: The Sorrows of the World

The third gate of grief opens when we register the losses of the world around us. Whether or not we consciously recognize it, the daily diminishment of species, habitats, and cultures is noted in our psyches. Much of the grief we carry is not personal, but shared, communal. It is difficult to walk down the street and not feel the collective sorrows of homelessness or the economic insanity revealed in commercialism and consumerism. It takes everything we have to deny the sorrows of the world. At nearly every grief ritual people share their profound sadness for the earth. One woman shared her gratitude for finally having a place to acknowledge in community this grief. They feel what psychologist Chellis Glendinning calls *Earthgrief*. She writes, "To open our hearts to the sad history of humanity and the devastated state of the Earth is the next step in our reclamation of our bodies, the body of our human community, and the body of the Earth."<sup>37</sup>

This is the gate where we most directly experience the soul of the world, the *anima mundi*. Here the alchemical observation that "the greater part of the soul lies outside the body" becomes evident.<sup>38</sup> As Jung noted, we live in psyche; psyche does not live in us. We are enveloped in a field of consciousness; everything possesses soul. This was known to every indigenous culture. What we feel from the surrounding world is not a projection of our own minds outward into the environment. We can travel just about anywhere in the world and we will inevitably come across vestiges of clear-cuts, those bleeding and scarred lands that look so desolate and violated. These places announce themselves as a wound, a rupture where life once moved and breathed. Our hearts sink into a deep grief in these times. Western psychology would most likely suggest that the grief we are feeling is related to our own experience of being diminished as a child, a metaphoric clear-cut, as it were. In that moment, we



would be left alone with our feelings of grief, wondering about how to heal this wound.

What if, however, the feelings we have when we pass through these zones of destruction are actually arising from the land itself? What if it is the grief of the forest registering in our bodies and psyches—the sorrow of the redwoods, voles, sorrel, ferns, owls, and deer, all those who lost their homes and lives as a result of this plunder of living beings? What if we are not separate from the world at all? It is our spiritual responsibility to acknowledge these losses. What if this is the *anima mundi*, the soul of the world, weeping through us? We know and feel in our bones that something primal is amiss. Our extended home is being eroded, as is the experience of our wider self. It is essential that we stop and recognize these losses. It is good manners to respond with sorrow, outrage, and apology at these places touched by so much loss.

We cringe when we see polluted rivers and litter strewn along roadsides. We felt the sorrows of the Gulf of Mexico as it struggled with the outpouring of oil into its waters. Our souls are connected with the soul of the world, and it is through this bond that we acknowledge our interconnected lives.

The cumulative grief of the world is overwhelming. The litany of losses could fill this book. Our ways of living have become corrosive to the earth, to prairie dogs and grizzly bears, to bluefin tuna and monarch butterflies and cultures. Every day, we see the dead lying by the side of the road—deer, raccoons, skunks, opossums, and foxes. Shopping malls homogenize the landscape of our communities, turning them into a bland slurry. We are depleting, with an ever-growing tenacity, the complex, multilayered song of the world and replacing it with a single-pitched monotone, depositing empty calories, sterile seeds, and meaningless objects in every developing country while silencing forever the voices of hundreds of cultures. Every few weeks a language is lost and, along with it, a nuanced

imagination of a people who were rooted to a place for perhaps thousands of years. Soon we will be left with only the barest semblance of the exuberant matrix that we once had, as the monoculture of modernity plows into the lives of every culture, replacing their traditions with imitations of our own pale expression of life.

How can we possibly stay open to the endless assaults on the biosphere when the urge to avert our eyes and pretend that we don't feel this pain takes over? It takes a heart of courage and conviction, one willing to look into the center of the suffering and remain present. To live a life of soul means living with sensitivity to the plight of the planet. I think of Rachel Carson, who launched the modern environmental movement with her work on DDT and other toxins; Lily Yeh rebuilding neighborhoods in the inner city of Philadelphia through programs that bring art and beauty to blighted areas; and Rigoberta Menchú protecting indigenous communities in Guatemala from corporate incursions. I think of Nnimmo Bassey fighting to protect the Niger delta from oil spills. Nearly every year, the people of Nigeria experience oil spills the size of the *Exxon Valdez* spill. There are thousands of men and women, whose names we will likely never know, who are defending their homelands from the assaults of greed.

I have listened to many young men and women share their stories of grief and outrage over the destruction of the world. One young man came to a ritual after spending months on the road, fighting for ecological and economic justice as part of the Occupy movement. He wept the most heart wrenching tears as he expressed his pain for the suffering world. His heart, however, was willing to stay open and register all that is happening in our communities and culture. At another gathering, a woman in her early thirties sat silently, tears streaming down her face. When she spoke, she shared her extreme pain for the world, how it pierced her heart and has shadowed her life with a persistent sorrow. Her faith in our future

had been shaken. The entire room was moved by the depth of her pain and her love for the earth. It is imperative that we grant shelter for these young and courageous people working on the front lines of change.

I was talking one day with a woman who works with communities around the world on issues of global climate change. She was telling me how much grief she had begun to feel as she travels and witnesses what is happening to people in regions that are already badly affected. She had tears in her eyes as she shared stories of whole cultures that may disappear because of rising sea levels. She was feeling the tears of the world and realized that she needed a place where she could reveal these feelings. She was eager to attend our grief ritual.

Walking through the doors of grief brings us into the room of the great grief of the world. Naomi Shihab Nye says it so beautifully in her poem "Kindness."

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.<sup>39</sup>

The cloth is immense. There we all share the communal cup of loss, and in it, we find our deep kinship with one another and the living world. That is the alchemy of grief, the great and abiding ecology of the sacred once again showing us what the indigenous soul has always known: we are of the earth.

Another facet of the third gate is the loss of our connection *with* nature. We no longer live with a sensuous intimacy with the wind, rivers, rainfall, and birdsong. For many of us, the voices of the wild

world have faded, receded in mind and imagination. The philosopher Thomas Berry said that we have become *autistic* to the world and have ceased to register the songs and moods of the singing planet.<sup>40</sup> Human biologist Paul Shepard said, “The grief and sense of loss, that we often interpret as a failure in our personality, is actually a feeling of emptiness where a beautiful and strange otherness should have been encountered.”<sup>41</sup>

The weight carried by this statement astonishes me. We were meant to have a life-long engagement with a “beautiful and strange otherness.” It was meant to be an ongoing presence, not something that we capture on our cameras while on vacation in Yellowstone or something we watch on the Nature Channel. Shepard spoke adamantly and repeatedly about how other creatures shaped us and made us human, how the lessons of coyote and rabbit, mouse and hawk taught us core values and how to live in a sustainable way. Animals were the first things that we depicted in recesses and cave paintings, the first we conjured in myths and tales. Their ways were integral not only to our survival but also to the very shaping of our souls.

Now, in the shortest wisp of a moment, the perennial conversation has been silenced for the vast majority of us. There are no daily encounters with woods or prairies, with herds of elk or bison, no ongoing connection with manzanita or scrub jays. The myths and stories about the exploits of raven, the courage of mouse, and the cleverness of fox have fallen cold. The others have retreated and have essentially vanished from our attention, our minds, and our imaginations. *What happens to our soul life in the absence of the others?* Shepard says that what emerges is a grief-laden emptiness. How true. And he was wise to recognize our tendency to attribute the emptiness to a “failure in our personality.”

Often, in my practice, I hear someone talk about feeling empty. But what if this emptiness is more akin to what Shepard is suggesting? What if it is a hollowness that comes from a prolonged absence

of birdsong, the scent of sweetgrass, the taste of wild huckleberries, the cry of the red-tailed hawk, or the melancholy call of the loon? What if this emptiness is the great echo in our soul of what it is we expected and did not receive?

We are born, as psychiatrist R. D. Laing reminds us, “as Stone Age children.”<sup>42</sup> Our entire psychic, physical, emotional, and spiritual makeup was shaped in the long evolutionary sweep of our species. Our inheritance includes an intimate and permeable exchange with the wild world. It is what our minds and bodies expect. Eco-psychologist Chellis Glendinning calls this original enfoldment in the natural world the *primal matrix*. We were embedded in this matrix of life and knew the world and ourselves *only* through this perception. It was an unmediated intimacy with the living world, with no trace of separation between the human and the more-than-human world.

What was once a seamless embrace has now become a breach, a tear in our sense of belonging. Glendinning calls this our *original trauma*. This trauma carries with it all the recognizable symptoms associated with psychic injury: chronic anxiety, dissociation, distrust, hypervigilance, disconnection, and many others. We are left with a profound loneliness and isolation that we rarely acknowledge. It is as if we have completely normalized our condition. And yet, this feeling of separation profoundly affects the range of our reach, the ways we participate in the landscape and sense our allegiance with the living world. Our soul life flickers dimly, and rather than feeling a kinship with the entire, breathing world, we inhabit and defend a small shell of a world, occupying our daily life with what linguist David Hinton calls the “relentless industry of self.”<sup>43</sup>

This beautiful and strange otherness was also meant to be seen in one another’s eyes. We, too, are meant to embody a vivid and animated life, to live close to our wild souls, our wild bodies and minds. We were meant to dance and sing, play and laugh unselfconsciously,

tell stories, make love, and take delight in this brief but privileged adventure of incarnation. The wild within and the wild without are kin, the one enlivening the other in a beautiful tango.

When we pause and allow our separation from the living earth to rise, we feel the “grief and sense of loss” that Shepard speaks of. When we open ourselves and take in the sorrows of the world, letting them penetrate our insulated hut of the heart, we are both overwhelmed by the grief of the world and, in some strange, alchemical way, reunited with the aching, shimmering body of the planet. We become acutely aware that there is no “out there”; we have one continuous existence, one shared skin. Our suffering is mutually entangled, the one with the other, as is our healing.

I have shared this quote of Shepard’s on many occasions, and there are always tears of recognition; the words are painfully true. We no longer look to the others in the world, and consequently, our souls are diminished. The multicolored world of animals, plants, streams, hills, and sky has faded from our attention. We are suffering from what ecophilosopher Richard Louv calls *nature deficit disorder*. We have all but forgotten the intimate connection between our breath and the trees, flowering plants, and oceans that offer us their gift of oxygen. We could not exist without this luscious world surrounding our senses with beauty and delight. We would indeed “die of a great loneliness” without the others with whom we share this animate earth. As ecophilosopher David Abram points out, we have become “a single species only talking to itself.”<sup>44</sup> We carry a sorrow deep in our bodies for the suffering earth.

Remembering our bond with the earth helps heal our bodies and souls. One young woman with whom I worked would consistently deprive herself of good food, as if she was not worthy of nourishment. One day I took her hand and led her out into the yard next to the building. I cleared away some leaves and grass, revealing the

naked earth. I brought her over, knelt down with her, and placed her hands on the ground, and I asked her to tell the earth about her struggle with food. A torrent of tears unleashed her grief about her feelings of worthlessness. Her tears fell to the earth, and she felt the benevolent pulse of the ground beneath her hands. This was a moment of healing, through the grace of the indigenous soul knowing its deep affiliation with this world. Her relationship to her own soul was reestablished, and she is now the loving mother of her own beautiful, well-fed daughter.

This sweet medicine is available to each of us, offered by the earth without reservation or deserving. We don't have to earn this grace; it is not a reward for doing something right. It is a matter of recognizing and feeling the fullness of this constant connection. Our welcome is not predicated on measuring up to a standard. It is a matter of intimacy, of relationship with this world as it is.

There is a ritual that my community does annually called *Renewing the World* in which we communally address the earth's need to be fed and replenished. The ritual lasts three days, and we begin with a funeral to acknowledge all that is leaving the world. We build a pyre, and then together we name and place onto the fire what we have lost. We place there the deaths of family members; the loss of things like mercy, democracy, and justice; the deaths of rivers and old-growth forests, of manatees and wetlands. The first time we did this ritual, I was planning on drumming and holding the space for the others. I made an invocation to the sacred, and when the last word left my mouth, I was pulled to my knees by the weight of my grief for the world. I sobbed and sobbed for each loss named, and I knew in my body that each of these losses had been registered by my soul, even though I never knew it consciously. For four hours, we shared this space together, and then we ended in silence, acknowledging the deep losses in our world.

## The Fourth Gate: What We Expected and Did Not Receive

There is another gate to grief, one difficult to identify, yet it is very present in each of our lives. This threshold into sorrow calls forward the things that we may not even realize we have lost. I have written elsewhere about the expectations coded into our physical and psychic lives. When we are born, and as we pass through childhood, adolescence, and the stages of adulthood, we are designed to anticipate a certain quality of welcome, engagement, touch, and reflection. In short, we expect what our deep-time ancestors experienced as their birthright, namely, the container of the village. We are born expecting a rich and sensuous relationship with the earth and communal rituals of celebration, grief, and healing that keep us in connection with the sacred. As T. S. Eliot wrote in *The Waste Land* “Once upon a time, we knew the world from birth.” This is our inheritance, our birthright, which has been lost and abandoned. The absence of these requirements haunts us, even if we can’t give them a name, and we feel their loss as an ache, a vague sadness that settles over us like a fog. This lack is simultaneously one of the primary sources of our grief and one of the reasons we find it difficult to grieve. On some level, we are waiting for the village to appear so we can fully acknowledge our sorrows.

How do we even know that we miss these experiences? I don’t know how to answer that question. What I do know is that when these things are finally granted to us, a wave of recognition rises that we have lived without this love, this acknowledgment, and the support of this village all our lives. This realization calls forth grief. I have seen this time and again. One participant in a grief ritual said, “Thank you for opening a door for us that we didn’t even know was there.”

At the core of this grief is our longing to belong. This longing is wired into us by necessity. It assures our safety and our ability to



extend out into the world with confidence. This feeling of belonging is rooted in the village and, at times, in extended families. It was in this setting that we emerged as a species. It was in this setting that what we require to become fully human was established. Jean Liedloff writes, "the design of each individual was a reflection of the experience it expected to encounter."<sup>45</sup> We are designed to receive touch, to hear sounds and words entering our ears that soothe and comfort. We are shaped for closeness and for intimacy with our surroundings. Our profound feelings of lacking something are not a reflection of a personal failure, but the reflection of a society that has failed to offer us what we were designed to expect. Liedloff concludes, "what was once man's confident expectation for suitable treatment and surroundings is now so frustrated that a person often thinks himself lucky if he is not actually homeless or in pain. But even as he is saying, 'I am all right,' there is in him a sense of loss, a longing for something he cannot name, a feeling of being off-center, of missing something. Asked point blank, he will seldom deny it."

I remember vividly my experience in Malidoma Somé's village of Dano in Burkina Faso in West Africa.<sup>46</sup> I felt pangs of envy when, every night near dusk, people would gather in the common area and share their day. (This is when we have happy hour in our culture. Drinks at half-price! Perhaps this is how we anesthetize our loss.) In Dano, there was food and millet beer, stories, laughter, and tears. It was thick with a feeling of welcome. Children were there as well, weaving in and out of conversations, playing until they lay down and drifted into sleep, filled with the sounds of their families and community, which lapped in their ears like waves on a beach. They were not segregated from the world of the adults. If a child was hungry and was nursing, any mother with milk offered her breast to the child. It took me days to figure out who exactly was the child of whom. Imagine how profoundly that would impact us, if we knew

that we were welcome in any home and could find sustenance at any fire. This has a lasting effect on the psyche. The children I met were generally happy, engaged, and curious, and they displayed a certain confidence. They knew they were a welcomed part of the village. It was clear to me that what we long for and what we need is the fulfillment of these primary satisfactions.

This nightly ritual was in stark contrast to Western culture. We tend to spend our nights separated from one another. Our storyteller is the television or the internet, and children are hustled off to bed to follow some regimented idea of bedtime. After all, they have schedules to follow. We often go entire days with only the barest connections with one another, with the earth, with ourselves. We are busy people!

What I felt in the people of Dano was a deep sense that they knew their worth and their welcome. These two things are extensions of one another: worth and welcome. There wasn't any anxiety of whether someone was good enough to be let inside the circle; this was a given. And don't hear this as some altruistic practice. The generation of healthy and contented people was a necessity for the sustainability of the village; everyone was needed; therefore, their well-being was essential. A healthy village requires healthy individuals. And to become a healthy individual, you need a healthy village. They are mirrors of one another, the one supporting the other.

I wrote earlier about shame and how this toxic emotion situates itself in us as a consequence of an inadequate sense of belonging. Here is a story that beautifully illustrates the link between belonging and how vulnerable we become to shame saturating our psyches. While I was in Malidoma's village, I met a young woman, about seventeen years old, with an extensive burn scar across her face. This did not seem to make her self-conscious; quite the contrary, she was ebullient, happy, and outgoing. One day I asked Malidoma about the scar. He said, "It was terrible. Her mother threw boiling water on her

in a fit of rage.” I asked what happened after that. He said, “The village responded immediately and let this young girl know that what happened had nothing to do with her, that her mother was wrong to do this, and that she was loved and cherished by the people.”

At that point I understood something critical about belonging and shame. Many of us have had experiences of violation and injury, not unlike this young woman. The difference between her experience and ours is that she had a village that immediately responded and dissipated the pain of a shameful act. In other words, what occurred to her remained *superficial*; it did not penetrate beyond the skin and become a part of her story. She carries a scar, but her soul is intact. Her village could see her value and helped her to remember her essence.

Without a village to reflect back to us that we are valued, these ruptures are interpreted in silence, in a vacuum, and the conclusion we often come to is “I must have deserved this treatment” or “I was somehow responsible for this.” I hear versions of this story often in my practice.

Another facet of loss at this gate concerns the expectation of purpose in our lives. Deep in our bones lies an intuition that we arrive here carrying a bundle of gifts to offer to the community. Over time, these gifts are meant to be seen, developed, and called into the village at times of need. To feel valued for the gifts with which we are born affirms our worth and dignity. In a sense, it is a form of *spiritual employment*—simply being who we are confirms our place in the village. That is one of the fundamental understandings about gifts: we can only offer them by being ourselves fully. Gifts are a consequence of authenticity; when we are being true to our natures, the gifts can emerge.

In our modern culture of hyperactivity and stress, we are seldom asked what we have carried into the world as a gift for the community. The frequent question is: “What do you do for a living?” Or

worse: “How you do *earn a living*?” I find that question obscene. We have gone from being seen as valuable to the community, a carrier of gifts, to having to earn a living. No one asks, “What is the gift you carry in your soul? What have you brought with you into the heart of the village?” We long to feel cosmically significant, that it matters that we are here and that we make a difference. Like the Pueblo Indians who know it is their cosmic duty to sing the sun up every day, we also long to feel that we are needed to keep the whole wild, spinning world happening. The absence of this remains as a persistent grief in our psyches. We have become spiritually unemployed.

Hidden within the losses at this gate lies our diminished experience of who we truly are. Our experience of identity has been radically reduced over the centuries, especially in Western technological cultures. What was once a seamless intermingling of body, family, community, clan, ecology, and cosmos has been reduced to a narrow realm where we live as an isolated cell occasionally colliding with other isolated cells. Widespread feelings of loneliness are a reflection of this rupture in our greater identity. This passage from Sigmund Freud acknowledges this loss while at the same time normalizing this state as the consequence of living in modern culture. He wrote, “Originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive—indeed all-embracing—feeling which corresponded to a once intimate bond between the ego and the world about it.”<sup>47</sup>

Whenever I talk about this loss with groups of people, there is a feeling of surprise and then sadness. They quickly realize that their experience of who they are has been compromised. What was meant to be a far-ranging identity riddled with intimacies with wild iris, stellar clusters, earthworms, and humans has been whittled down to the narrowest hub. We exist in a state of isolation, cut off from an

encompassing community of others. We often feel flattened under the weight of domestication, which smothers the heat and howl of our wild selves. We feel eviscerated, made tame by rules and conditioning that blanket the world with uniformity and mediocrity. This reduction in vitality and vividness induces a smoldering rage. Domestication mutes the poetry and music of the world, crushing the articulated and nuanced rhythms that accompany all living things, what poet Federico García Lorca called the *canto hondo*, the deep song of the world. And we are emptied.

In a somewhat humorous fashion, Michael Ventura speaks to this reduction in identity. He writes, “You are not one person, you are many people, you are a community of moods and selves under one name. Parts of you aren’t even human, they’re part mammal, part reptile, part rose, part moon, part wind. And life is a question of which parts are dominant—which, in effect, possess you. (I think most people walk around possessed by the dullest parts of themselves; this, the worst state of possession, is called “normal.”)<sup>48</sup>

To be left with a “shrunk residue” or to walk around “possessed by the dullest parts” of ourselves is a great loss. Rather than enjoying a rich fullness that envelops us throughout our lifetime, we instead inhabit a sense of self that feels cut off from the world. Rilke reminds us—exhorts us—to not lose the world.

Ah, not to be cut off,  
not through the slightest partition  
shut out from the law of the stars.

The inner—what is it?  
if not intensified sky,  
hurled through with birds and deep  
with the winds of homecoming.<sup>49</sup>

To not be cut off, however, we need to be moving in a rhythm that is syncopated with that of the oaks and willows, heartbeats and touch. We must recall the original cadence of the soul. One of my most memorable teachings about slowing down came from my mentor, Clarke Berry, a Jungian analyst with whom I apprenticed, following licensure. I was young, and I knew I was in need of a mentor, someone who could teach me the art of sitting with others in therapy. The Jung Institute in San Francisco referred me to Clarke along with other analysts, but when I met him, I knew I was in the right place. Our first meeting, over thirty years ago, was unforgettable. When we sat down, Clarke reached to his left, placed his hand on a large rock lying on a table, and said, "This is my clock. I operate at geologic speed. And if you are going to work with the soul, you need to learn this rhythm, because this is how the soul moves." Then he pointed to a small clock also sitting there and added, "It hates this." What an amazing thing to tell this young therapist. It is the single most important thing I ever learned about therapy, about working with the soul. I share this story with every person I work with; I use it as a means of calming the urgency to change and helping patients return to a rhythm that enables them to listen once again to their own soul.

### **Facing Emptiness**

The unconscious disappointment that lingers from the failure to receive these necessary elements in our life slowly evolves into a sense of emptiness. Nearly every day in my practice, someone speaks to this feeling of hollowness. And I think, how good to name it, to bring it into the room and sit with it. How important it is to keep it in front of us, instead of having it trail behind us, out of sight, pulling us away from others and from life.

When I first consciously faced my own emptiness, it felt like a sheer drop off a cliff; I could not find the way back up. I was floating in a sea of pain and sorrow that had no words. All I could do was

try to welcome what came, weep every day, and let those close to me know what I was going through. I needed to tend and care for this vulnerable place. This well of grief was deeper than anything else I had faced in my life, and the terrain was suffused with emptiness and darkness. There was no one else in this place, no hands to comfort, no arms to hold and support. No other voices could assure me of my connection to the world. I felt utterly alone. Whether or not there is any personal history to this perception is not what is important. What did matter was that I stumbled into this place, and its truth was undeniable. Daily weeping was something I had never experienced before. In fact, I had always been in control of myself emotionally, having shaped a life made up only of the known. I stayed in the well-lit areas, at the shallow end of the pool. I kept other people outside safe peripheries. I had built a strategically controlled life in which I was appreciated and respected. But when I plunged into this place of emptiness, it was like a wall that had been blocking my view was shattered, and I could finally see how I was limiting my life in hopes of avoiding the emptiness. For whatever reason—perhaps grace—the lens of my perception was being cleansed by my tears and I could finally begin to see the layers of invulnerability I had established to keep myself safe and alone.

My story is far from unique. Many of us are running away from this hollowness. The courage it takes to face this emotional vacuum is tremendous. I have never been so fragile, so out of control, so inundated by wave after wave of grief as I was when I finally faced the emptiness within, but I am grateful that I did so. It is as though the ocean floor of my psyche shifted, and an air pocket rose to the surface of my life. This pocket held precious pieces of my life from times when I could not process the grief, loss, betrayal, and disappointment that was moving through my world. These times had been too much for me emotionally, and so they broke free from consciousness, going subterranean, waiting till the time when I could

face them once again. When that emptiness appeared, the arms of community were there to hold me, helping me to endure the terror of that aloneness. It was because I felt held and loved that I was able to descend into these places of darkness. My psyche had waited until the vessel was strong enough to take the heat of this confrontation with these pieces of my soul life.

Facing our emptiness is key to our freedom. Until we do, we are driven by lifelong patterns of avoidance. It is important to remember that this emptiness *is not a reflection of personal failing, but a symptom of a wider loss*. When we abandoned the Old Ways, established over hundreds of generations, we lost the traditions that made us feel held and embodied. The psychological, emotional, and cultural design that offered us assurance and security in the face of grief or loss has been replaced by a belief system that generates anxiety and a sense of insecurity. Emptiness now saturates our culture. Addictions, consumption, and materialism are symptoms of this condition. More accurately, they are attempts to cope with the unbearable feelings of barrenness.

To be empty, to feel empty, is to live in the wasteland near the gates of death. This is intolerable to the soul. We were not meant to live such shallow lives. Our heritage and our psychic makeup are designed for an elaborate richness of imagination and creativity that allows us to feel intimately connected to the ongoing creation. We were meant to drop below the surface of things and to experience the depths of life in the same ways that our deep-time ancestors did. Their lives were filled with story, ritual, and circles of sharing. Their lives were not shamefully hidden away but known—losses, defeats, grief, pains, joys, births, deaths, dreams, sorrows; the communal draw of life was open and acknowledged. This is what the soul expected, what it is we need today.

A young man of twenty-five participated in one of our annual gatherings in Southern California. He came filled with the bravado



of youth, covering his tracks of suffering and pain through a multitude of strategies. What lingered beneath these tired patterns was his hunger to be seen, known, and welcomed. He wept the most wrenching tears upon being called “brother” by one of the men. He later shared that he had considered joining a monastery, just so he could hear that word spoken to him by another man.

During our time together, we held a grief ritual. Everyone there, save this young man, had experienced this ritual before. Seeing these people dropping to their knees in grief broke him open. He wept and wept, falling to his knees. Slowly he began to welcome individuals back from the grief shrine and to feel his place in the village solidify. He was home. He later whispered to me, “I have been waiting for this all my life.”

He recognized that he needed this circle, that his soul required the singing, the poetry, the touching. Every experience of these primary satisfactions helped to restore his being. For him, this was the beginning of a new life.

## The Fifth Gate: Ancestral Grief

The fifth gate of grief is what I call “ancestral grief.” This is the grief we carry in our bodies from sorrows experienced by our ancestors. Much of this grief lingers in a layer of silence, unacknowledged. Many of our ancestors arrived in the Americas after leaving their homes, family members, and communities behind. Some arrived here after being abducted and forced into slavery. These generations often survived without a feeling of home, living with only marginal connections with the Old Ways to guide them. The traditions that had nourished and held their people for hundreds, if not thousands, of years were difficult to sustain on the new continent. They lived betwixt and between the Old and the New Worlds, attempting to create something that would enable them to endure. Without the

protective shelter of the village, they often coped in ways that created a secondary layer of suffering: alcoholism, isolation, rage, and a restrictive silence that cut them off from the living support of others. There was a gap in the dream of what it meant to be human. The rich and nuanced patterns of culture that had evolved over time were replaced with strategies designed simply to help them survive. Gone were the patterns that held myth, song, ritual, and the poetic imagination as the heartbeat of the people.

We hold this ancestral grief in our beings, even after many generations in the new land. This sorrow becomes concentrated over time, gathering grief unto itself, and is carried in our psyches unconsciously as a diminished inheritance. The psychic inheritance from our ancestors was meant to be a blessing, but instead it is a layer of heaviness. The stoic façade and behaviors of these generations left behind a legacy of unattended pain. Mayan shaman Martín Prechtel says that we are surrounded by the ghosts of unwept ancestors.<sup>50</sup> The truth in this statement is visible in many of the people I see in my practice.

Sometimes I will be working with someone who carries a sadness that is hard to identify, but it is there nonetheless. After exploring many possible sources for this sorrow, I often ask if there was something in the family history that might be lingering in his or her body. Following some reflection, there is often a memory of some loss, some wounding that occurred to a grandparent or some experience of abandonment that resides in the psychic history of the lineage. Sometimes it centers on the great tear in the psychic foundations of a family following the suicide of a child, parent, or sibling. I have worked with a number of individuals who carry the inheritance of this wound. In this place, grief and shame become intermingled, making it difficult to sort through the confusing emotions that accompany the story. These individuals often feel haunted by the fear that this may also become their destiny.

One woman I worked with struggled for years with her body image. She held a lingering hatred and contempt for herself. She never felt good enough, pretty enough, or loveable. Something shifted during our work, and the shape of this wound actually intensified. She began to feel disgusted by anything remotely associated with sexuality. She had never felt this way before, but it was now so overpowering that she could not let her husband be near her physically. We explored this feeling from her personal history and from the cultural wounds of women and sexuality. None of this lifted the oppressive weight of these feelings. One day I said to her, "I don't think this is yours. I think this belongs to your ancestors, and it is coming down the generations into your body seeking healing." She thought about this and something resonated in her body. At that point, it felt that the only way to move this would be through ritual. We talked about some ways she could approach it, and she decided to move forward in the following days. After her ritual, she wrote,

Over the past year I have been working with parts of myself that have been deeply neglected and misunderstood. There are several of these parts, but I think the one that has most affected me throughout my adult life has been my sexuality or erotic life. I come from a long lineage of frigid women. Women who have been taught that it is best to keep our sexual selves deadened and cloistered. Women who have been taught that in order to be good and righteous, we must, above all else, eschew and tacitly hate the part of us that desires the erotic.

I have come to see this story as an ancestral curse. It is an ancient family of lies so paramount and awesome that the erotic lives of generations of women have been destroyed (and certainly, in many cases, never even begun). When my mentor suggested that a ritual was needed in order to break this curse in my life, I was hesitant, to put it gingerly. I was doubtful that something as

simple as a ritual could do so, but I've learned that soul work can only be done on a soul level.

Leaving my conscious mind out of it as much as I could, I went with instinct when creating my ritual. I somehow knew I needed the earth for this. Actual dirt or sand or loam. And I needed water, a large body of water. The earth possesses the energy of the erotic feminine, which is what I was invoking in my own life, and so I knew I needed sacred contact with her somehow. And I felt sure part of this contact needed to be submersion in her waters. I decided to go to a beach during a time I knew would be quite empty. I sat down in the sand and began to write down every bit of the old story I wanted to forget. I wrote without stopping for as long as the thoughts kept coming. My physical body had a pretty intense reaction to this part of the ritual. I began to sweat as I wrote, and I felt so nauseous at one point that I actually had to run to the bathroom. It was as if my body was ready to expel the lies of this curse even before my conscious mind was. With a marker, I then wrote the dominant words of the curse on a large rock and set it aside. Originally, this was my plan for the writing portion of the ritual, but as I sat there, I felt like there was more needed from me. I started to write in my journal again, and out began to pour my deep, hidden desires of the erotic feminine in my life. I wrote words and phrases that I have never allowed myself to think about, let alone bring into the world in black and white. This new story turned out to be much more difficult to write than the old. I was embarrassed by my fantasies and shamed by the "dirty" and "inappropriate" words I was using. But as I wrote, these words—my truth—got easier to write. And then they began to flow with relative ease, and the shame and embarrassment I have ALWAYS carried with them were no longer the principal emotions I was feeling. Instead I felt excitement and desire and a sort of tingling energy throughout my whole body. These were subtle

and still a bit quiet, but they were there! When my pen stopped moving, I knew I was done with this part.

I picked up the rock, took off my cover-up and walked into the waves. I threw that rock as far away as I could, and then allowed the water to envelope me. Actually, the word I would use is *caress*. I allowed the sea to caress my entire body, and for the first time in my life, I didn't push the pleasure of being touched out of my mind. I embraced it and laughed out loud. I raised my hands up to the sun and twirled in circles. And then I went and lay on the wet sand, face down. I rubbed every part of my skin against the grainy sand and then rolled over and did the same on my back. I spread out my arms and legs (like a snow angel) and let myself feel the earth and her energy holding my glorious body. In that moment of sacred contact, I realized that I have the same exact erotic nature as the earth. All of that energy and feminine sexuality is inside of me, and it is my birthright, my soul's duty, to embrace and fully live my erotic life.

It is strange, really, because I spend much of my time communing with nature, and though I have had many glorious moments of sacred knowing, I have never experienced anything as profound and lasting as I did during this ritual. And what baffles me even more is that I didn't really believe that a simple little ritual I cooked up one afternoon would change a lifetime story of shame, guilt, and denial, but it has. When I stood up from the sand, something had shifted within me. I mean, I was actually standing differently. I felt lighter, fuller, more present in my body. But even more, I felt sexy, and somehow I truly believed that my body is a beautiful, perfect, erotic part of me that I get to celebrate and enjoy. It has been two months since this day, and however impossible it seems to my conscious mind, I have not once fallen back into the old story. I am thirty-eight years old, and for the first time in my life, I am finally able to look at and touch myself with awe and gratitude.<sup>51</sup>

Tending this undigested grief of our ancestors not only frees us to live our own lives but also eases ancestral suffering in the other world. One young man carried a feeling of shame for which he could not account. We had been working with this issue for some time when I thought to ask one day if there were any stories he knew of concerning his parents or grandparents that might be contributing to his shameful feelings. Almost immediately his grandfather's alcoholism flooded into his mind. He had never met his grandfather, but there was a curious absence of discussion in the family regarding this important individual. As we talked about him further, he could sense the shame that the family bore about their refusal to acknowledge the man and how that shame had "infected" him in his youth. He slowly realized that the shame he was carrying was not his, but his family's shame over this man and his struggle with alcohol.

Ancestral grief also speaks to the grief that remains in our collective soul for the abuses of millions of individuals. It carries the weight of our genocide of the indigenous cultures that were encountered when European settlers arrived in the New World. It speaks to the shameful legacy of slavery and to the killing fields of the Civil War. This grief carries the shadow of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It carries the suffering of many cultures across the planet whose paths collided with the march of progress. All this weighs on our psyches. This grief is so immense it is hard to reconcile. We have much work to do here as a culture, and it may take many grief rituals and rituals of reconciliation with the Native Americans of this land, with the descendants of the Africans who were enslaved, and at places of death and destruction to begin to heal this lingering sorrow. The long shadow of this violence persists in our psyches, and we need to address it and work with it until there is some genuine atonement for these wrongs. This is clearly part of the "sequestered pain" that Stephen Levine spoke of that generates the persistent hum of sorrow in the background of our lives.

One other facet of ancestral grief revolves around the loss of the ancestors. We no longer look to our ancestors as a source of connection with the invisible powers in the world. In a very real way, we have lost our connection to the land, language, imagination, rituals, songs, and stories of our ancestors and, because of this, we feel homeless. In our obsession with progress and our addiction to the new, this is a grief we deny. It is a grief that comes with the pressures our ancestors felt to assimilate and become part of the American culture and to abandon their connection with the Old World. My parents were the children of German immigrants, and they rarely spoke the old language except when they needed to say something to one another and not have me and my siblings understand what they were discussing. There was a feeling that this heritage and history was something that needed to stay hidden. I felt confused about why this secret, special language was not part of my own world. Healing this loss of our ancestors often requires that we reconnect with our forgotten lineage. Since I began to do so, I have found immense richness in the myths and stories of the ancient *Germani* and how they lived in direct connection with the living earth. This acknowledgment of my ancestors provided ballast for my life; it restored a foundation that had been missing, one from which I could move more deeply into relationship with the wider world. This is a form of ancestral soul retrieval each of us can do. As we do so, we become better able to set our souls into this soil and become indigenous on this land.



There are other pathways of grief, other thresholds that could warrant their own gate. Trauma, as we have seen, is one territory that may need its own gate. When we are exposed to violence, whether in wartime, natural disasters, or the violations of our integrity in body and soul through rape, molestation, or assault, some part of us splits

off in order to survive. While this move is necessary in order for us to keep on living, it also carries a loss of our essential wholeness. Trauma *always* carries grief, though not every grief carries trauma. Therefore, grief work is a primary ingredient in the resolution of trauma. Ultimately, these gates all lead to the same chamber, the communal hall of sorrows. It makes no difference which door we open, which threshold we cross. Every one of us has grief at each of these gates. When we feel hesitant or uncertain of our worthiness to touch our sorrow, knowing these gates are there offers us a way to connect with our losses, wounds, and disappointments.

All too often we deny our grief because it is not as severe as someone else's. How can we possibly compare our sorrows to those who are suffering the horrors of war or the devastation brought about by tornados, hurricanes, tsunamis, or intolerable poverty? It is easy to dismiss our grief when we compare it to circumstances we consider to be much worse than our own. But the grief is ours, and we must treat it as worthy of attention. In fact, it is essential for us to welcome our grief, whatever form it takes. When we do, we open ourselves to our shared experiences in life. Grief is our common bond. Opening to our sorrow connects us with everyone, everywhere. There is no gesture of kindness that is wasted, no offering of compassion that is useless. We can be generous to every sorrow we see. It is sacred work.